

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

New York/Albany HUD Financial Operations Center Partnership with Northeast Career Planning Under the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Program

Issue: Creating jobs for people with disabilities

Summary

The Javits-Wagner-O'Day program (JWOD) employs people with disabilities to provide services for the federal government, through partnerships with local vocational support agencies. In the spring of 1998, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Albany Financial Operations Center entered into such a contract with Northeast Career Planning (NCP), a non-profit, vocational rehabilitation organization. NCP employees – people with physical, developmental, and mental health disabilities – develop transferable skills in an integrated office setting while the Albany HUD Financial Operations Center receives high quality services at a fair price.

Introduction

Persons with disabilities may encounter barriers that limit their career opportunities and ability to obtain meaningful, paid employment. Lack of flexibility (such as the ability to modify work schedules) and workplace supports (such as lack of assistive technology and mentoring) are but two factors that contribute to an approximately 70% unemployment rate for persons with disabilities.

The Javits-Wagner-O'Day (JWOD) Program is a federal program that promotes and facilitates employment opportunities for persons who are blind or have severe disabilities and is overseen by the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled. The JWOD Program originates from the 1938 Wagner-O'Day Act, which created jobs for people who are blind to manufacture and sell brooms to the Federal Government; the act was amended in 1971 to include people with severe disabilities. In order to participate in the JWOD program, an organization must maintain not-for-profit status and ensure that at least 75% of its total direct labor hours are performed by individuals who are blind or have other severe disabilities.

The JWOD program promotes employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Albany Financial Operations Center entered into a contract under the JWOD program with a private, non-profit, vocational rehabilitation organization, Northeast Career Planning, which created jobs for people with disabilities. This report provides an overview of this partnership and is based on information obtained from interviews with program staff and written materials regarding the project.

Background

In 1997, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) placed central responsibility at the Albany HUD Financial Operations Center for oversight and administration of the Title I Loan Insurance Program, a national insured loan program, and, as part of this reorganization, Albany HUD contracts out for certain clerical and accounting support services. The office chose to work with Northeast Career Planning (NCP) which serves people with all types of disabilities and/or barriers to employment. NCP works with individuals to help them achieve their maximum vocational potential by providing an array of services and supports including job training, travel training, emotional support, and job site adaptations (such as sign language interpreter services).

Intervention

Beginning in 1998, Albany HUD wrote two contracts under the auspices of the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Program, facilitated through NISH¹, with NCP that employ a staff of ten people with physical, developmental, and mental health disabilities. Under this arrangement, NCP remains the employer of record, thereby retaining personnel and payroll management responsibilities.

The NCP contract employees provide clerical support, including mail processing, filing, and data entry support services, to the Claims branch of the Albany HUD Financial Operations Center. Additionally, in another branch, NCP's staff are employed as account clerks responsible for a myriad of supportive accounting functions including maintaining ledgers and reconciling accounts, coding transactions, and processing invoices. Due to the technical nature of their work, account clerks receive significant onsite training and mentoring from Albany HUD staff.

An NCP contract supervisor is on-site to serve as the primary liaison between HUD and NCP and provides daily support to NCP contract employees. This individual is the first point of contact for NCP employees and is available to answer their questions, provide individualized training, manage workload, and provide emotional support. Many contract employees also participate in NCP's Supported Employment Program and, as a result, have access to Extended Services Counselors who are available to provide long-term job maintenance support.

Implementation

Each contract took approximately six months to operationalize and involved considerable staff time and resources on the part of both HUD and

NCP. NISH staff assisted NCP administrators in pricing the clerical and accounting services and negotiating the initial contract with Albany HUD. Additionally, NISH provided technical assistance and trainings on the multitude of federal regulations and reporting requirements as well as broad-based business management training.

One of NCP's primary tasks was to recruit and hire the contract employees as well as an onsite supervisor. Identifying the right candidate to fill the Contract Supervisor position was an especially critical and time consuming process as this individual had to be able to supervise a team of individuals with a variety of disabilities, ensure a productive and consistent work flow, and serve as the liaison between NCP and Albany HUD.

Employees provide clerical support and work as account clerks, with on-site support and training.

NCP also devoted a significant amount of time creating a detailed training manual. This manual was developed to serve as an on-site training tool and involved doing task analyses, in which each task in a job was broken down into small steps. Visual aides, such as pictures and charts, were created in tandem. Finally, NCP devoted a substantial amount of time creating internal systems to ensure that its payroll and benefits administration functions were in accordance with JWOD requirements.

During the planning phase, Albany HUD staff worked with the NCP job coaches to familiarize them with their operations. The job coaches, in turn, worked one on one with new NCP employees in the early months of implementation to provide on the job training and support. Account clerks received additional technical training from HUD staff on the principles of accounting.

Impact

Currently, the contracts employ nine FTE contract employees and a full-time onsite supervisor at an estimated cost of \$275,000 for clerical services and \$200,000 for account clerk services for fiscal year 2002. (All contract employee's wages are set by the Department of Labor (DOL) and are based on the DOL's current wage determination rate which includes

¹ NISH, formerly National Industries for the Severely Handicapped, is a national nonprofit organization established in 1974 as part of the Javits-Wagner-O'Day (JWOD) Act. It's whose mission is to create employment opportunities for people with severe disabilities by securing federal contracts for its associated agencies. NISH has a network of more than 500 community-based, nonprofit rehabilitation programs that produce quality products and provide a variety of services to federal customers nationwide. NISH is committed to helping its associated agencies succeed in providing employment opportunities to individuals with severe disabilities.

a dollar amount that can be used to purchase benefits or taken as cash.) The contracts are funded from HUD's General Insurance Fund, which is funded primarily through insurance premiums paid by participating lenders. A percentage of NCP's General and Operational (overhead) expenses are factored into ongoing contract costs. HUD also incurs administrative expenses for their work on this contract.

The HUD office has noticed value-added improvements to their work-flow: before entering into the contracts, with other administrative staff, the accounting work was merely, "getting done;" now, the NCP staff are doing such a good job with their clerical tasks that the HUD office is able to spend more time on oversight of their data sources and is better able to manage overall operations. In fact, accuracy rates for

the NCP account clerks are over 95% for this calendar year. There has been very little NCP staff turnover to date and two employees have transitioned from clerical to accounting positions. In 2001, the New York State Rehabilitation Association awarded HUD's Albany office its *2001 Business/Industry Recognition Award* for its successful partnership with NCP in providing jobs at good wages for persons with disabilities in an integrated setting.

Contact Information

For more information about Albany HUD's partnership with Northeast Career Planning, please contact Linda Strohl, Coordinator of the Community-Based Training Program, At (518) 438-3445.

Discussion Questions:

What lessons can states draw from this practice, either for government purchasing programs or for supportive employment options?

How can these programs ensure people continue to be challenged on the job, once people have mastered their assigned tasks?

This report was written by Kristin Simone, M.M. It is one of a series of reports by Medstat for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in home and community-based services. The entire series is available online at CMS' web site, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov>. This report is intended to share information about different approaches to offering home and community-based services. This report is not an endorsement of any practice.